

JAEPL, Vol. 16, Winter 2010-2011

## It's Complicated: Using Facebook to Create Emotional Connections in Student-Professor Relationships

Anthony Atkins \*

In the aftermath of the recent tragedies at Northern Illinois and Virginia Tech teachers and students drew together to heal the devastation caused by campus violence.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of such tragedies teachers, students, and the surrounding respective communities at Northern Illinois and Virginia Tech developed strong emotional bonds on their campuses as everyone suddenly seemed to realize that we're not just students and teachers defined by what we do, but rather that we are all humans with thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

After such tragedy, the emotion on these campuses becomes transparent and indeed becomes a reaction *expected* by members of the public. In the February 2008 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, three new assistant professors, Joseph Flynn, Andrew Kemp, and Samara Madrid, outline their experiences just after the shootings at Northern Illinois University. Their accounts illustrate how they felt during the days just following the tragedy. Through their accounts, we learn their feelings about their campus. Andrew Kemp claims he had already given his "heart to the university" after one year of teaching there. He typically wears sweatshirts with the NIU logo or some other NIU paraphernalia to class (C4). Kemp simply claims "I am hurt." Samara Madrid displays her emotion even more prominently by hanging a sign in her office that reads "Love is spoken here" (C4). She says, "As a new assistant professor I never expected to witness such an event. NIU is my new home, and this new campus is my family. The tragedy has uncovered the love that resides within me for my students" (C4). Joseph Flynn, another new assistant professor at NIU, responded with empathy, saying, "The campus shut down, and so did I. . . . I slept. I wept. I talked to no one—not even my wife and son, much to their consternation and concern" (C1).

In light of recent university tragedies, I thought deeply about my relationships with current students. Was I doing enough to show them that I really did care about what happens to them now and after they graduate? I know early in my teaching career I truly did, but now, in the wake of tenure, publication, and reputation I had come to distance myself slightly from certain mentoring situations. Is the same kind of love that Flynn, Kemp, and Madrid illustrate in their narratives possible without a larger tragedy?

These tragedies illustrate the power of, and the need for, emotional connections between teachers and students. Emotions are a vital part to learning, and positive emotional connections between teacher and student facilitate learning. However, as a male teacher committed to nurturing my students, males and females, I have discovered

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\* Anthony Atkins is Assistant Professor and Composition Coordinator at UNC Wilmington where he teaches courses in professional writing as well as computers and composition, rhetoric, composition theory and pedagogy. He also serves on the editorial board for *Kairos: Rhetoric Technology and Pedagogy*.

1. On February 14, 2008 at NIU, a shooter killed five students and wounded more than 20 people. On April 16, 2007 at Virginia Tech, a shooter killed 32 people and wounded many others. Both shooters committed suicide.

that such emotional connections in everyday teaching life are fraught with problems. In this essay, I argue for the necessity of strong emotional bonds between student and teacher and want to suggest Facebook as a medium by which teachers and students can connect without running the risk of misperceptions.

### **Need for Emotional Connections**

I used to meet with students for lunch on campus, chat with them in the library, and meet with many of them in my office. I discontinued these activities not because something had happened or because someone had said something to me, or even that I thought anyone *thought* something inappropriate. Indeed, my colleagues seem satisfied with my interactions with students and my university seems to encourage strong bonds between students and professors. However, I wanted to maintain my reputation as a caring professor rather than, as some of my students say about other professors, a “creeper.” Like many of us, I had heard about other professors at many universities who found themselves in precarious rumor-milled stories involving poor choices with students. Certainly, unverified academic rumors remind a new tenure-line professor like me that mis/perceptions and mis/communications can happen and sometimes cannot be undone. While close relationships with my colleagues help to squelch rumors, students and other members of the campus community may view my mentoring relationships differently. Why chance it?

Sara Hopkins-Powell seems to encourage strong student-professor relationships but with some trepidation. For example, she reminds me why I began to distance myself when she says, “The concept of unconditional love may seem an unlikely topic for college faculty members to consider in this time of sexual-harassment charges and consensual-relationship policies” (285). Slowly, in fact, I fell victim to worrying about what others thought of me (like most untenured faculty members), particularly if they saw me having lunch with a student or mentoring students outside the confines of my office or building.

Of course, I suppose all of this depends on what we really mean by unconditional love. The question Hopkins-Powell seeks to answer in her brief essay is: “How do we experience unconditional love in our teaching?” (285). She then relays what I think are two positive experiences of unconditional love: one as a student (as in graduate student and dissertation advisor) and one as a teacher. Hopkins-Powell suggests that we cautiously develop relationships of this nature with our students. She says,

It is because we are human beings, and practicing this love can carry us past the indifferent students and the endless meetings. It is because, as a colleague of mine from Mexico says, ‘teaching is the most important work in the world, and we do it one student at a time.’ When you are enriched by another’s love and friendship, it is a deep breath of life. (287)

“A deep breath of life” echoes the feelings of Flynn, Kemp, and Madrid. Few of us become professors or teachers for monetary gain. Indeed, I never felt more successful as a teacher than watching a recent student receive a senior medallion award, an award for which I had nominated her. However, distancing myself from students became something I was doing regularly but unconsciously. I eventually realized that I was worried about

what others thought about my interactions with students. Hopkins-Powell identifies the kind of worry about misperception I experienced when she says,

Other issues to be aware of are the inherent power differential and the potential for oppression within the relationship. Faculty members must constantly remain sensitive to relationships that change from platonic to sexual—whether real or imagined—particularly with younger students or those who are mentally fragile. Boundaries need to be maintained and spoken about in an open and thoughtful way. (286)

I see clearly why some professors shy away from relationships of any kind with students. Sometimes, even when boundaries are clearly set, those on the outside do not always recognize them. Having boundaries might also mean needing to post them on an office door. The reality of why unconditional love is not happening in many cases comes in Hopkins-Powell's final reason for why teachers should practice this type of relationship. She says,

some faculty members, out of fear of sexual harassment charges, have completely shut students out of their lives. They have no personal interactions with students, even with the door open. I view that as a tremendous loss, both for the faculty members and the students. With care and maturity—and a degree of courage—we professors can open ourselves up to deep intimacy and love with a person whom we bring into our hearts, and hold for a lifetime. (287)

I work at an institution where the focus, at least on the surface, is primarily about teaching, working with students, and engaging in student-professor relationships—ones that generate research, foster learning, and give the students a unique learning experience. When we professors begin shutting out our students for fear of misperception, indeed I think we all miss something significant, something meaningful. While unconditional love can define a committed teacher, what are the dangers of practicing it in student-professor relationships for someone like me, an untenured assistant professor who is also a single, mid-30s, heterosexual male? How might we practice unconditional love without giving rise to both misperceptions and misconceptions?

### **Problems with Emotional Connections**

Less than a year ago, I went to Greenville, NC, to visit one of my professors from undergraduate school. If I ever loved a professor as a student, it was he. I mentioned to him that I took an undergraduate to a conference in Georgia. The student won a grant that required him to attend a conference. Since the student and I were working together on another project, I asked him to submit a proposal with me so that we could both attend and offer a presentation. The issue heated up, however, when I also confessed at that moment that I was really only willing to work with male students. He sat up in his chair and said, "And, so, the women who deserve your attention and help will be passed over for no reason except that *you* fear their gender?" I said, "No, but I fear my colleagues' perceptions of me working, traveling, and developing mentoring relationships with them." What I wanted to say was that I could not afford to have any troubles simply

because women are in my office working on their projects. Being much more experienced than I, he claimed that I was discriminating against my female students and that I should stop worrying so much and just do my job. While I knew he was correct in many ways, I still felt nervous and apprehensive.

Jane Gallop's provocative account of being accused of sexual harassment shows why. The book breaks from the norm of sexual harassment. I found *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* disturbing in many ways. I immediately thought: "If a feminist can be accused of sexual harassment then surely anyone could."<sup>2</sup>

I admired Gallop's collaborations with her graduate students. She writes,

Although always tricky, they generally produce excellent results: I see the students consistently learn a lot, work really hard, and clearly benefit from working with me; I also learn a lot in such relationships and derive real satisfaction from seeing the difference I can make in the quality of their thinking and their work. (54-55)

Yet ultimately her relationships with students crumbled before her because of a specific incident of miscommunication and misperception. She continues,

in this case, the relationship failed. Not because of its adventurous style but in the way so many teaching relations fall apart: more than once I told the student her work was not satisfactory; she did not accept my judgments and became increasingly suspicious and angry. And because so much passion had been invested in our relationship, the failure was particularly dramatic. The student felt let down, became outraged, and charged me with sexual harassment. (55)

Gallop's experience reinforced my hesitation to work with students at a university where the population is largely female. For example, in an English composition class last semester, I had 22 female and three male students. English majors are predominately female, as well. Inevitably, situations occur where working with students who are intelligent, motivated, and bright would be female.

Last semester, I worked with four young women on four separate independent projects, took two of them to a regional conference, and nominated some of them for department and university awards. They came during office hours and frequently brought food, coffee, and good cheer to everyone around. The faculty members next to me and across from me loved them as much as I did. However, one day while two of them were in my office, a graduate student stopped by, stared at us, and then said out loud, "Do you only work with girls?" The three of us looked at each other and became keenly aware of what the grad student implied.

However, having a conversation with my female students about this very incident, I was surprised to learn that they were very aware of male professors who shrank away from them when they sat next to those professors in their offices. One student said that every time she entered one of her professor's office, he would move his chair as far away from her as possible, refuse to lean over her to look at a paper, and never allow her to

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2. I am aware that my first thought does not have much basis in the reality of sexual harassment cases, but in general, it seems that those most often accused of sexual harassment are male.

be herself—which all together made her uncomfortable, and in fact, made her feel like she was doing something wrong. She decided that she would not return to his office.

This sort of shrinking away from students can create an environment where everyone seems on edge. It is not the way to help students learn or facilitate unique learning and teaching experiences. This is the reason I employ Facebook.

### **How Facebook Is a Solution**

Facebook has garnered a range of responses and more than its fair share of publicity on television, the Internet, and in print. Universities around the country are creating various restrictions and limitations on the use of such social networking sites.<sup>3</sup> However, while some are complaining about Facebook, many professors of writing are investigating ways with which we can use Facebook in the classroom. Facebook helps make connections between people transparent when used for classes or interest groups. Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison define such social network sites as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (n. pag.)

The potential value of Facebook for student-professor relationships becomes apparent almost immediately. Many of my students are “friends” on my Facebook, which means that I am able to view their news feeds, uploaded images, interests, and even chat with them if we are both on our Facebook page at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most common ways I use Facebook to create emotional connections with my students is by being involved with Facebook in the same way as the students. For example, many of my students are members of the student media board, and they have a Facebook site. I joined that group so I could keep up with what my students do outside of my class, but still within the confines of the university. Sometimes they are pleasantly surprised that I already know about their articles even before the student newspaper has been released. For instance, I knew when one of my students published an article in the school newspaper that was recognized by the student media director; therefore, I could congratulate her when I saw her.

I also use Facebook to share my photos, thoughts and ideas, and students sometimes comment on them. Thereby, we can become friendlier without having to be within physical contact with each other, erasing the potential for misperceptions. Facebook becomes even more useful when students and I embark on individual projects.

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3. For administrative and pedagogical reservations concerning Facebook—students’ and faculty’s improper use, cyberstalking, etc.—see Read and Young and Bugeja.

4. Facebook also allows users to share their current status. For example, before leaving for an academic conference I often leave an update that might read: “Heading out to San Francisco for the C’s conference.”



Figure 1: Portion of Atkins' Facebook Page

Yet professors and students also need to be aware of self-disclosure. How much should professors disclose about themselves? We must be cautious on Facebook almost as much as we are face-to-face. Jeffrey Young writes of a religion professor at Dartmouth who wrote a number of embarrassing statements about her colleagues on Facebook. Problem? She mistakenly thought she had adjusted her Facebook's privacy settings so that only her Facebook friends could see the posts, but unfortunately anyone who came across her Facebook page could read her rants (and, indeed, many professors now have Facebook accounts and/or search Facebook users for various reasons). Eventually, Young observes, the professor had to apologize to her colleagues and claim that all her comments were made in jest. So, like many modes of communication one should always recognize the rhetorical situation.

Facebook, however, has provided a medium whereby students and professors can connect effectively and intellectually. Facebook has offered a way that I can engage students, maintain a close relationship with them, forward a research agenda, and teach them valuable technology skills without running the risk of misperceptions: mine, my students, my mentees, and my colleagues. Mentoring and expressing love for my students, or developing what Kenneth Burke would call identification, can be facilitated using Facebook (see 19-28).

Facebook can even reconfigure what unconditional love for our students actually means. Joseph P. Mazer's, Richard E. Murphy's, and Cheri J. Simonds' experimental study examines the effects of professors' "self-disclosure via Facebook on anticipated college student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate" (1). The authors delve into how professors' self-disclosure on Facebook affects students' perception of teacher credibility. Their study addresses three hypotheses represented below, suggesting that when participants viewed a professor whose level of self-disclosure on Facebook was high, they would anticipate:

- Higher levels of student motivation than participants who view the Facebook website of a teacher low in self-disclosure.
- Higher levels of affective learning than participants who view the Facebook website of a teacher low in self-disclosure.
- A more positive classroom climate than participants who view the Facebook website of a teacher low in self-disclosure. (5-6)

In all three cases, these hypotheses were supported by this study. The students who agreed to be part of the study were asked to come to a computer lab where the researchers had created three Facebook profiles of teachers with pseudonyms for names. One profile had little more than a head shot of the instructor, the second one had a medium to high range of self-disclosure, which meant there were “wall” postings, additional pictures, and possibly a few other things. The third profile had more pictures in various situations, wall postings, groups, quotes, etc. In short, a higher degree of self-disclosure from professors can increase students’ motivation to learn. The students were asked to browse a given profile to develop an impression of what it would be like to be in class with the teacher. The study results support the idea that the higher degree of self-disclosure a professor has of her/himself directly affects the motivation of the student as well as the classroom environment (9). The data in this study suggests that professors should be less guarded about themselves and their personal lives.

Obviously, professors should not reveal the most intimate details about themselves on Facebook, or even in face-to-face classes, even though writing professors know that students have few qualms about revealing details about themselves when writing in first-year composition courses. Rather, professors should advertise their boundaries as permeable, based on maturity, scholarly interests, and intellectual merit. The few negative responses coming from this study suggested that professors needed to consider their professionalism when using Facebook, and that professors should also use Facebook more for teaching rather than for personal reasons. In all cases, however, students seemed to have positive responses to teachers who used Facebook (11-12).

The fact that a professor has a Facebook account brings what colloquially means “street-cred,” or what professors might call ethos. Having credibility and establishing ethos fosters an honest working relationship between professors and students that can be fun and empowering for both.

However, a user of Facebook—whether professor or student—should remember that a profile also has the potential to reveal ideological characteristics of a user. Anne Hewitt and Andrea Forte investigated relationships between faculty and students within the Facebook community because they were skeptical of such characteristics. For example, they say,

Through personal contacts, we learned that some faculty members at various institutions are establishing accounts as a way of connecting with students. We heard anecdotes about increased communication and friendlier relationships with students. These observations raised questions: ‘How are student/faculty relationships affected by interaction on Facebook, if at all?’ and: ‘What does the social landscape look like when faculty begin to frequent an online place where students regularly socialize?’ Because social networking communities are built to support presentation of self, identity management is likely to be a significant issue for participants in communities whose membership crosses perceived social boundaries and organizational power relationships. (n.p.)

The perception of the authors mirrors that of many. If faculty “frequent an online place where students regularly socialize,” then there is an automatic assumption that faculty should not be there. I find this line of thinking completely fair when it comes to face-to-face interactions in social settings where the space is designed for students, for example,

downtown bars or restaurants dedicated to serving the student population, but I am less inclined to think so about online community spaces that cater to various audiences for various purposes. And in fact, the author's two-year study supported the idea that students "are comfortable with faculty being on the site" (n.p.). Much like Mazer, et al., the authors used Facebook profiles for students to view. However, this study used real faculty member Facebook profiles to gauge how students viewed their relationships with the professors. The study took place in two large courses at two mid-sized public research universities.

More important, many professors are discovering various pedagogical possibilities. Recently, one of my colleagues observed students using Facebook to help them find information about a local debate occurring on campus. My colleague, who is currently teaching activist rhetoric in an upper division professional writing course, agreed to share two experiences of Facebook in the class. Below is the first example she emailed to me:

I was walking students through some exceptionally dull PowerPoint slides covering the third chapter of Hart and Daughton's *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*. Both because the book is hard and because I was enabling them not to buy it since it's not the backbone of the class, I made very detailed and 'texty' slides outlining the chapter concepts. I used the campus tree email from the chancellor as an illustration of how the chapter's advice on 'Analyzing Situations' might help them analyze a real situation. When we were going over the audience factors in the analysis, we talked about skepticism toward the chancellor's ideas because of audience members' attitudes toward her role. That's when they took it upon themselves to go to Facebook to critique the make-up of the university's environmental assessment committee.

My colleague also assigns students to teach the class about a current or historical activist organization, social movement, or incident of activism, to demonstrate its rhetorical strategies and adherence to course concepts. She said,

The second instance of academic Facebookin' was more typical, I would guess, of how we imagine social networking sites being used: during a student presentation on the Westboro Baptist Church's protests of funerals, a student went to the Facebook profile of his friend who was killed in Iraq. He wanted to show the class his connection to someone whose funeral had actually been protested by the group, to add a layer of meaning to the shock and horror with which his classmates were already reacting. (The student who showed this Facebook profile, btw, was \*not\* one of the presenters and didn't know that he'd be hearing a presentation on WBC that day; it was a spur-of-the-moment reaction to show us the page.)

Using Facebook in classes can encourage long-lasting professional relationships with students, mostly without misperception based on the proximity of student to professor. Using Facebook helps students learn technological skills and enables student-professor relationships to form for the benefit of the university, department, student, and professor. Student-professor relationships are delicate in some cases and professors should put boundaries in place, but we must continue to put student-professor relationships back into university education.



For example, when I was working with four female students on individual projects, we agreed to communicate via Facebook.<sup>5</sup> This prevented my office from being filled with students most of the day. Making the move to communicate online provided a space where we could chat freely and share ideas among each other. As I prepared for a conference on information literacy in Georgia, I began sharing my proposal and project with the four students, who immediately began critiquing it thoughtfully. We noticed that two of the students' projects worked well with what I was working on so we meshed the projects into a conference panel. Using Facebook, we chatted, added links and commented on each others' projects.

While we had met face-to-face a few times as we prepared most of the work on the projects, the work for the conference presentation was done totally online, using mostly Facebook. Eventually, the three of us travelled to attend and present at the conference. By this time, the two female students, had become very comfortable with me because they had come to know more about me as a person. We were able to maintain a close bond with each other over the course of a year.

Another experience of using Facebook to help students professionalize occurred while I was directing an honors thesis for a student who recently won a grant from our undergraduate research and learning center. The university earmarks the grant for "undergraduate student travel to attend a professional conference with a faculty sponsor." The student's honors thesis was strongly influenced by my own interests, which made it only common sense that she travel with me to the University of North Carolina-Charlotte where I would be running a workshop with a colleague who works in the same area. As the situation unfolded, I reminded myself that anything I said or did could have consequences. I booked our hotel rooms and arranged the travel. The student then asked if another student, with whom I am also currently working, could accompany us since there was room and no additional monies needed. Not sure what to do, I spoke with a colleague who encouraged me to allow the second person to go. The three of us went to the conference where they both excelled. Watching them interact with faculty from other universities and teach the participants how to use Facebook was probably one of the most gratifying moments of my entire teaching career. They conducted themselves with professionalism and intense attention to all details. I could not have been prouder to have both of them with me.

After the four-hour drive back, the first student looked at me with a bright face, thanked me, and even hugged me. The other student also hugged me and told me the workshop was the best experience she had had, since becoming an English major.

Readers can experiment with Facebook by creating an account, profile, and adding "friends." Simply go to <http://www.facebook.com/> and submit your full name, email, and password. Facebook is intuitive to work with. Once you have created an account, you can begin to use the "search" feature to find new "friends." However, I do not tell students that I have a Facebook account, nor do I "friend" my students. I leave the students to "friend" me, if they choose. This way, I am not bothering them nor appearing as though I want to snoop into their lives. If my students send a "friend request" to me, I typically accept

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5. We also used Wikispaces to house the content of our projects. This way we could all comment on each others' projects.

it. Accepting the friend requests sent to me by the four female students who worked with me all last year was, indeed, the smartest thing I did. It has changed the way I work with students.

We professors must recognize the potential emotional connections we can have with our students. We can begin to create those emotional connections with students now. As Facebook and other Web 2.0 technologies become ever more prevalent, more professors are turning to them to teach technology skills, writing for online venues, increased audience awareness, or a number of other pedagogical aims. Certainly, there are a number of ways to integrate these technologies into the classroom, but what has helped me develop such close emotional connectedness to my students and increased the quality of their productivity is the fact that they have enjoyed getting to know me on Facebook. My classes are full every semester, students often enjoy working with me on honors and independent projects, and indeed, I continue to include them in regional conference presentations. I have avoided misperceptions of my work with them.

At the campus vigil on that Friday night after the shootings at NIU, Samara Madrid recounts what the Reverend Jesse Jackson told students, faculty, and administrators:

He asked us to embrace one another, to reach out to those next to us. I stood in the back, with my colleague, good friend, and fellow assistant professor Kim Zebehazy, and with tears in our eyes we honored those lost as we hugged and embraced those who are still here with us. (C4)

Let us not wait to love our students, nor wait to recognize when they need us—especially when some technologies can make it possible for us to maintain intellectual and emotional connections with them.



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